

THE HISTORY ASSOCIATION
PRESENTS A STUDENTS' PANEL DISCUSSION ON
**THE AMBEDKAR CARTOON
CONTROVERSY:**
TESTING THE FRONTIERS OF ACADEMICS AND
POLITICS
CALL FOR PAPERS

Historically, education has been imagined as important practice of building a society of the future – be it in terms of preserving status quo or bringing about a change. In India, exclusion of lower castes from Vedic knowledge helped to perpetuate the caste system for ages. The power dynamics in modern education have been different in many ways and have its own specificities. It has been a politically contested terrain; for what is considered politically correct by different groups has tended to be seen by them as educationally appropriate.

The recent controversy over the Ambedkar cartoon in the Political Science textbooks of NCERT has created flutters among academic and political circles. According to Satyanarayana, a prominent Dalit intellectual, this is the first time since the Mandal agitation that Left-Liberal intellectuals of all colours and hues have come together in opposition to the Dalit intellectuals. For the upholders of 'critical pedagogy' that itself is a tragedy – for it was the coming together of Left, Liberal, Dalit, Feminist academicians and activists for the writing of these textbooks that provided a rebuttal to the politics of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. Besides the question of Dalit politics and textbooks, connected issues like censorship, the 'politics of humor' have also been debated along with the historical context of the cartoon itself. In the backdrop of the cartoon controversy that has generated such a pitched and multi-layered debate, we may tend to identify more with one shade of opinion than the other. But this also might

be an opportunity to question the limits of both. Would the questioning of ‘critical pedagogy’ still be accepted by its advocates as being well within the purview of *criticality*? Would the questioning of the *iconization* of Ambedkar by certain Dalit intellectuals be immediately castigated as being anti-Dalit? There can be several such questions that further complicate the debate.

As we all wonder what to make of this controversy, there are certain specific questions that we are faced with. The textbooks written by the NCERT in a way reflects a broad ‘political consensus’, a *common minimum* as it were that defines the broad contours of the country’s life. With the up thrust of critiques of secular homogeneous nationhood by historically marginalized groups including Dalits and women, and also changes introduced by the NDA, the old textbooks were considered redundant by the NCERT and hence the new textbooks.

Whom do these next textbooks offend and why? Which offences are to be addressed immediately? Most importantly, who decides these issues? Is there a conflict between being offended and being critical and rational? What are the limits of criticality within which ‘critical pedagogy’ operates or how critical is ‘critical pedagogy’? In a country as diverse as India, is it possible to have a ‘national’ textbook at all? And with this controversy where do these textbooks, and the National Curriculum Framework stand? What does it say about the politics of these textbooks? Is there any way to address the gap between the textbooks and their interpretation in the classrooms? How important is the role of the textbook in classroom teaching in any case? What is the role of the teacher teaching in the classroom in the dissemination of the knowledge that the textbooks intend to offer? If a substantial gap remains between what is written in the books and their reception in the classroom with its many forms of caste prejudice are the textbooks bound to die an early death?

It is with these questions in mind that we intend to organize a seminar on the Ambedkar Cartoon Controversy. We invite short papers (of maximum 2000 words, with presentations lasting for 10-15 minutes) from students of the School of Social Sciences. The papers could broadly pertain to any of the issues raised in this concept note or

others. Kindly mail your papers to chshistoryassociation@gmail.com. The last date for submission of papers is Tuesday, 18 September (this date will not be extended). **The event shall be held on 24 September in CHS, SSS.** For further details please contact Divya (7838651457); Nilesh (9717824831); Gaurav Kumar (8459506525); Gaurav Garg (8130283430); Anubhuti (9013275506); Aviroop (9654775829); Akash (9953466027); Anirban (9811608998); Pratyay (8376973856).